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SCHLER  
PICKLES  
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History of  
*Sechler Pickles*

1921 ~ 1996

*By Franklyn Sechler*





This history of the Ralph Sechler & Son, Inc. Pickle Company is not meant to be cited or to be printed and distributed as is, but is meant to be a source of information for various purposes.

First, it is for the family of Ralph and Anne Sechler to keep and hand down to its offspring, as long as there are those who want to be interested.

I am sure when Ralph began working for the *D.M. Sears Company* in 1919 that he had no idea his career in the pickle business would evolve as it did. Nor did he dream that 77 years later he would have grandchildren running the company!

He had no idea the early years, which are so interesting to me, were worth making notes about. Here, I have tried to reconstruct those years in order to depict what he and Anne did, to survive, to forge ahead and eventually to succeed.

I realize my parents' accomplishments were no greater than many other people, but they were my dad and mother. This is about an interesting and unique business, and I just want it in written form.





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First, it is for the family of Ralph and Anna Sechler, to keep and hand down to its offspring, as long as there are those who remain interested.

Second, it is for the many local people who have been such a loyal and supporting group for the company through the years.

Third, it may have parts to it which will aid in writing a concise and accurate account of the Company for retail room dispensing, for mail order inquiries, gift box enclosure, and for press coverage.

At this time, in late spring of 1996, in spite of not having all questions answered, I have decided to get the notes I have in somewhat of an organized form. When this is done I will try again to get additional information and add to this history.

Dad, Ralph Sechler, was born a mile northeast of the present factory in 1894 in a log cabin. He attended the St. Joe High School for three years, because it was only a three-year high school at that time. He completed his high school education at Butler High School, riding to and from Butler on the Wabash Railroad.

After graduating from Butler High School at age 18, he took summer instruction at Tri-State College. He then taught at the Carr School during the 1912-1913, 1913-1914, and 1914-1915 school years. An article of interest in the January 25, 1915 *Auburn Courier* tells of the grammar room students with their teacher, Ralph Sechler, being taken out to the Carr School in Fred Reeder's sled, where the children entered into a contest with several other local schools.



The opportunity for Dad to eventually become involved in the pickle business would have occurred in 1915 when the *D.M. Sears Company* of Fort Wayne made a decision to build a pickle receiving and salting station in St. Joe. According to an article in the previously mentioned January 25, 1915 *Auburn Courier* the *Sears Company* had signed up 75 acres which was sufficient to justify the construction of this station. Dad would have been 20 years old at this point.

In the fall of 1915 Dad entered Indiana State Normal in Terre Haute. He was there two years, during which time he met Anna Martindale of Greenfield, Indiana. They were married on August 8, 1917. (The name Anna was to become Anne after marriage.)

Dad entered the armed services in September, 1917. After basic training he entered OCS and was commissioned 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Artillery on August 31, 1918.

I do not have an exact account of his first working for the *D.M. Sears Company* but since *Sears* built the salting station at St. Joe in 1915 and Dad entered Indiana State that fall, it is pretty safe to say he worked for *Sears* the summer of 1915 and again the summer of 1916. He probably even worked for them part of the summer of 1917, although he got married in August and left for the service in September.

During the 1917-1919 period, Mom taught home economics at Seymour Indiana High School, and gave birth to Louise on June 4, 1919. Dad, because of his major in mathematics, was retained by the Army to teach math to officer candidates in OCS and therefore, did not go overseas.

Confirmation of his starting to work for *Sears* in 1919 is found in a letter from his good friend Roy Maxwell dated June 17, 1919. It states, "*Ralph, I was mightily tickled to hear from you again. I had begun to think you had got 'pickled' from your daily contact with the D.M. Sears Company*" The letter was



mailed from Niederbresig, Germany where Roy was in the Army of Occupation as a member of the band.

Upon his discharge in 1919, Dad went to work for *D.M. Sears Company* at its Fort Wayne processing plant and office on West Main Street. This building still stands, but not in a usable condition.

Dad told me he was put in charge of the twelve receiving stations *Sears* owned at that time. Nine of these confirmed locations were in St. Joe, Spencerville, Butler, Hamilton, Edon, Edgerton, Laotto, Angola, and Fremont.

Various publications document these locations. **Angola Herald Republican** contained an article stating if *Sears* could sign up 100 acres they would be able to open a new station in Angola. Other information in research about receiving stations revealed the following. **Sears Company** would open a station in Syracuse if they could sign up 100 acres. A 1928 publication there makes reference to Ralph Sechler opening a salting station in Auburn Junction. These two locations (Syracuse and Auburn Junction) would make the total eleven stations. One is yet to be accounted for.

The transition of Dad from an employee of *Sears* to that of entrepreneur on his own must have been gradual, but certain, and a little confusing. The following information about his activities in the pickle business was found in several historical records.

The March 11, 1920 *St. Joe News* states, *Ralph Sechler of Fort Wayne is here this week making a tour of this section securing pickle contracts for himself; Ralph has leased the Spencerville, St. Joe, and Butler pickling stations of the Sears company and will operate them for himself. When not working for himself he will be at the Fort Wayne Office.*

So, here it is saying *Sears* leased three stations to Dad, but he still had certain duties to perform for *Sears*.

Three years later, in March of 1923, local growers were being solicited by the *D.M. Sears Company* with S.S. Widney serving as the local representative. (S.S. Widney was Dad's uncle.)

In August, 1920 Ralph Sechler, wife, and baby of Fort Wayne stayed at the home of Susan Sechler during the pickle season.

In 1921, August 4, there is a reference to Charles Curie and Harcourt (Bud) Miser looking after the pickle business at Butler and Hamilton for Ralph Sechler. The Hamilton crop will be trucked to Butler and stored in vats there.

In January, 1922, a reference to Ralph carloading pickles from St. Joe on Saturday and carloading pickles from Butler on Monday.

So, it appears as written above, Dad leased the three stations in 1920 and operated them in 1920, 1921, and 1922, but at the same time was a *Sears* employee looking after other stations for them and possibly doing some work at *Sears* Fort Wayne Plant and office.

At the end of 1922 this relationship ended, and *Sears* sold Dad the stations at Hamilton, Edon, and Edgerton. Although we assign 1921 as the year Ralph started on his own in that *Sears* leased him the three stations at St. Joe, Spencerville, and Butler, his actual ownership of pickle receiving and salting stations and his severing of ties with *Sears* began in 1923.

In the three-year period during which Ralph leased stations, he sold some brine stock to *Meeters, Inc.* of Lansing, IL. *Meeters* was a large kraut packer and the largest dealer of onion sets in the U.S. *Meeters* speculated in buying the brine stock of Dad. In the course of settling the account, they made a contract for 1923, at which time Dad was on his own, where as *Meeters* would do the financing and Dad would do everything else necessary to contract and put up a crop of pickles in brine. Income after expense was to be split.



Something that took place on October 20, 1924, while Dad was sorting brine stock at Edgerton, never made the financial journals of the time, but prolonging the Sechler Pickle business was assured with the birth of his son, Franklyn.

The Meeter Dad always worked with was Anthony, or 'Tony' as he was called. Tony wouldn't talk business over the phone on Sunday. For a time he was national treasurer of the Christian Reformed Church. He was a fine and honest business man, but a half cent could make or break a deal with him

Dad spent quite a bit of time finding and buying onions for *Meeters*. These were white onions from pickling (small) sizes to boilers (1 ½ -2" diameter). Dad would often grow some of one or both. I worked in the onion fields through high school. Several times we salted them down in the pickle vats.

Onions were grown in the muck in NE Indiana. Good yields were had, but there was a lot of expense as the muck was full of weed seed and until the 1950's there was no good herbicide. So, the onions had to be weeded by hand.

I remember weeding for my Uncle "Pat" Monroe - Dad's brother-in law in his hot muck and making 35 cents for half a day - 7 cents a row. I will admit I wasn't too swift at this. Uncle Pat also raised dill weed and helped a little at seasonal intake time.

When onions were mature the tops would wilt and fall over. Then, they were pulled and arranged in "wind rows." This meant pulling from a couple of rows and making one with the onions all laying in the same direction so the tops covered the bulbs. This was so the sun didn't sunburn the bulbs which could turn them green.

After a week or ten days in the sun the tops would dry to the point when if run over a wooden screen (parallel slats) the fairly dry tops would come off and

drop through. Then the partially cleaned onions were put in onion flats (shallow rectangular crates) and stacked up to dry further. All of this was done at the field.

When this stage of onion drying was over - perhaps another week - they were taken to the "onion barn" for final clean-up which was running them over a wire mesh shaker run by an electric motor.

One time when we had stacks of the onion crates in a row along a fence Stanley Garman, who worked for Dad that summer, was going between the fence, and onion flats inspecting them for dryness, when a big black snake came out of a flat at about chest height. Stan, who was my math teacher and coach during high school, and a friend still, worked several summers for Dad. One of the jobs which he wasn't too fond of was running a pickle sales route over into Ohio. I remember also a time when Dad sent him to the Fremont station for some maintenance work and he broke through a board and a nail penetrated rather deeply into his leg. Seems that Stan experienced a few more trials than most of the men!

Stan was one of the men working at the time I had to "take over" when Dad was instructed by his doctor to take a few weeks off. Naturally I was apprehensive about giving any instructions to one of my teachers and my coach. However, Stan was very considerate knowing I was having some misgivings about my role.

Another thing on onions before I leave the subject; there was a period in the late 40's into early 50's when we would barrel up several barrels - could be either the small "pickling" sizes or the larger "boiler" size and take them around to people's homes to get them peeled.

The people were usually shut-ins, needing to make some extra money. We would unload a barrel full of onions, take an empty barrel along and then go back when they let us know they were finished.

I know I didn't do it all, but if I was home (not in college) I did most of it...It was hard work to do alone. It involved getting the barrel off and then later



reloading it - and the places where I was asked to locate the barrel weren't usually easily accessible.

Eventually we discontinued doing this as Dad was afraid of getting in trouble with the Department of Labor for a "sweatshop" practice. It was too bad for the people doing that work as there was little in the way of welfare and social security funds then.

One day I was helping load out a carload of the boiler size onions by dipping them into 48-gallon barrels. To dip either onions or pickles, as the contents of the tank got lower, one would have to put in two ladders and run a plank from one to the other to stand on. I was dipping and one end of the plank slipped off, putting me into the onions and brine up to my neck. Louis Bleeks called Dad, who came down and took me to the gravel pit and went on home to get me clean clothes. Luckily, it was summer!

When I graduated from college I encouraged Dad to sever the relationship with Tony Meeter; it had long been unnecessary (from a financial standpoint). I went with Dad to Lansing for this purpose. Tony understood my feelings. Among other things he said that day was that the answers to any business problems could be found in the scriptures. I never forgot that.

Dad and Tony's association had lasted 25 years. I couldn't help but admire this and wished I could be like either one. I named my second son Ralph Anthony after Dad and Tony Meeter.

Tony died in 1960 and Dad died in 1962. Their association only involved fresh cucumbers, onions, and brine stock. The processing and selling of finished product was just Dad's.

The following bits of information about the growth of the pickle business were gleaned from old records.

Ralph went to Burlington, Iowa, in May, 1927, to store pickles for a Chicago firm that he had been selling his supply to the last few years. "*By supplying this customer with the choicest stock it has won for him a prestige and has established a confidence in his ability as a judge of fine pickle stock.*"

In May, 1928 there was a solicitation for pickle acreage and a statement that the *D.M. Sears Company* would take pickles at the St. Joe Station during the season of 1928. Contracts were to be taken by Reverend McKnight and the St. Joe Valley Bank.

*Sears* announced the St. Joe Station would open about August 1. (As a boy I remember August 1 being a usual time to open as compared to around July 10 now.)

In May, 1927 the word was out that if anyone wished to contract pickles for St. Joe delivery, they were to contact the News Office or call Ralph Sechler. (So, whether *Sears* was out of the St. Joe station in 1927 and back in 1928, or whether they had Ralph look after their interest in 1927, I am at a loss to explain.)

During 1926 Ralph was in the Lutheran Hospital for three weeks being treated for a stomach ulcer. This ailment persisted the rest of his life. My first challenge as a "manager" was between my Junior/Senior year of high school, when Dad had a hemorrhage of the ulcer and he and Mother were ordered by his doctor to take a two-week rest in Brown County.

Also, in July of 1926 Ralph spent two weeks at Camp Knox, KY for intensive training as a reserve officer. The fact cucumbers didn't start bearing until August 1<sup>st</sup> in those years, would have allowed that. In September, Ralph reports his pickle business flourishing at Edgerton, Edon, and Hamilton.

In February of 1929 Dad was in Lansing, MI attending the meeting of the National Pickle Packers Association. The Michigan Department of Agriculture was backing this meeting with a couple of days of related schooling.



The National Pickle Packers was the forerunner of the Pickle Packers International. We became a member of the PPI in 1950. Michigan State University was the first university to provide extensive research and help to the pickle industry. Now, there are a half-dozen universities doing research of one form or another.

David and I have both served on the board of directors of the PPI. My tenure was 1984-1991. David went on the board in 1992 and is still serving. It was and is a very good experience. Others on the board are from firms like *Heinz*, *Campbell Soup (Vlasic)*, *Dean Foods*, *Claussen*, and several our size or some larger.

Today there are only three family firms of any size (including *Sechler's*) and only two other independent of any size. The rest of the labels you see in the super markets once represented independents like ourselves, but now are part of a very large firm or conglomerate. In the 1996 Directory, under *Dean Foods*, there are 14 different brands I recognize as once being separate entities in my time! There are several other brands I don't recognize and could be representative of a manufacturer in a location I am not familiar with.

1930 was the year Dad got started in establishing several routes on which he sold pickles to restaurants. The only pickles he made himself at this time were **Genuine Dill Pickles**. The sweet varieties, limited to **Relish**, whole **Sweet Pickles** and **Sweet Crosscuts**, were purchased of pickle processors in the Chicago area. These would be shipped in barrels (50 gallon) and/or kegs (15 gallon) at a time to Dad and he would pick them up at either the B&O Depot in St. Joe or the Wabash Depot a mile west of St. Joe.

I loved going with him to get these products at the train depots, but of course, was too small to be of help. I especially liked going to the Wabash Depot as a 1 cent vending machine was inside with small wrapped chocolates. I would

always get a penny from Dad. I guess the vending machine was there for the occasional ticket buying passenger, or section crews.

Dad had started this new venture of selling finished products by using his old Model T Ford car to deliver in and sell from. By fall of 1930 it was obvious that he needed different transportation. Joe Sechler, a bachelor cousin, offered to loan Dad the money to buy a new Plymouth Sedan which he got from the local *Hanna Motor Sales*. Then in December, 1931, Dad bought a new International truck. The truth is it was an old used one, but it was a big improvement over a sedan. I remember this truck and slightly remember the Plymouth with its back seat removed and full of cases of pickles. The only thing I remember about the Model T was riding on Dad's lap and thinking I was steering.

For a couple of years the pickles Dad purchased in barrels were repacked into gallon jars by Mom and a neighbor lady, Mrs. Martin. Mrs. Martin's son, Gordon, shared the following. His mother was working for the Widney Orchard (right across the road from Mom and Dad's home) for \$1.25 a week. Dad paid her 10 cents an hour for 32 hours (\$3.20 a week).

The first packing operation took place in the back kitchen of the house. Then "modernization" took place when the basement was enlarged with wide concrete stairs leading to the outside. This made it possible to skid barrels down the steps and be repacked in the basement. A long, rectangular concrete sink was made in the new ledge in which gallon jars, exchanged at the restaurants for credit, were washed and the labels removed and then filled with pickles or relish. I can't say the concrete sink was as sanitary as today's stainless steel food equipment!

In February 1932 Donald Hart was driving Dad's "new International" and had a close call when the front bumper dropped off throwing the machine into the guard fence breaking the cable and posts.



About this time *D.M. Sears Company* went out of business. We were well into the depression and a lot of businesses went broke. *Sears'* head of the processing department, who Dad knew while working for *Sears* in 1920-21, came to St. Joe and asked Dad if he had any work. His name was Frank White. Dad said he could use Frank "now and then," but he didn't have the money to hire him full time.

With Frank being available on this basis, Dad and Mom decided to chase the cows (literally) out of the barn behind the house and turn it into a factory. A lot of work was performed including cleaning the barn, pouring a concrete floor, and finding steam power.

In the meantime other crude steps were taken. A copper kettle was secured, concrete blocks stacked on top of each other on either side and a 3" pipe run across on which the kettle hung. The kettle served two purposes. First it was used to heat the water to desalt the brine stock. This took place by putting three bushels of pickles in a wooden barrel and pouring hot water, heated in the kettle over an open fire onto the salty pickles. (Today we desalt 420 bushel at a time per desalting tank.) The pickles after soaking in water for 24 hours, were then put into vinegar to soak for several days. Then the kettle was again used. This time sugar, water, and spice were mixed in the kettle and the vinegar soaked pickles were added. The temperature was brought up by burning more firewood. After the right temperature was reached, the pickles were dipped out with long wooden-handle dip nets and put into another wooden barrel for aging.

This procedure was used again when a major catastrophe struck in the winter of 1937-38. Looking ahead to when the "barn factory" would be finished, Dad sent Mom to a farm auction being held in Ohio to bid on a steam engine used with threshing machines. She was the successful bidder. A local man from St. Joe brought the engine under its own power to the new factory site.

When the engine was hooked up, new steam pipes carried steam to a wooden desalting tank where 30 bushels could be desalted at a time in hot water heated by live steam, and to a double-jacketed kettle which held a barrel of "sour" pickles (those having soaked in vinegar). The "jacketed" kettle had steam between the inner and outer jackets of copper and would have had a new solution of sugar and spices made to replace the liquid vinegar.

With this improved production capability, Dad started building up the restaurant business by establishing routes to other towns and cities besides Fort Wayne. As this succeeded he needed more room. First, he built a garage-like addition to the south end of the barn to be used as a warehouse and truck storage. Then, he built an identical structure to the north end to be used for packing purposes.

Next, the big wheels were removed from the steam engine and it was placed on a permanent brick support. A wooden structure was built around it to keep it from being exposed to the elements. Finally, in 1937 Dad was having a "big new" addition" put on the back. It was made of used lumber and was, I suppose, 25' x 25'. It was going to be used for a packing room. On October 10, 1937, just before the structure was finished, a fire wiped out the whole place. Dad only had \$350.00 insurance.

I can still "see" Frank White when he arrived from Fort Wayne for work on Monday and saw the ashes and debris! But when Dad said he was going to rebuild, up went the rail and kettle, and the wood fire underneath, and Frank started doing things again like when he first went to work for Dad.

Also, Mom helped get the basement back into operation only this time, with Frank on the job, we had to fit a relish "squeezer" in the basement and it took up most of the room. The relish squeezer in those days was a wooden box about 4' by 6' and 15" deep. Chopped pickles called "chops" would be put in until the box



was clear full. Then a wooden lid would be placed on top that was a loose fit between the sides and ends. A couple of 15 gallon kegs would be put on top and filled with water for weight. By morning the sour vinegar would have been squeezed out and the chops were then ready to mix with sugar, spices, and water to make the relish. A shovel and a good man were needed.

Today, we use a stainless steel device which is an auger and as the auger takes the chops forward from the intake end to the discharge end, the auger increases in diameter as the casing decreases, thus squeezing more and more juice out until at discharge the chops are almost dry. This device was made in Southern Indiana for the pumpkin industry. Many pieces of equipment used by the pickle industry were originally made for another food product; usually a food much more used than pickles.

The stainless steel Kerrian diameter grader - a beautiful and expensive machine that we use to diameter grade gherkins was originally made in North Dakota for grading potatoes.

Our first "strip" cutter was a machine made to "quarter" beets. One had to drop pickles down through the machine by hand. Today's strip cutter is a V-shaped trough with two moving flat belts which center and "throws" the pickle through stationary blades. This machine in turn is fed by a shuffleflow feeder that separates a "pile" of pickles with a shuffle action and at the discharge point you have a bunch of pickles end to end going into the strip cutter.

On the subject of plant equipment, the most interesting happening as far as I am concerned, was the decision to put in the *White Cap* equipment to use their closures, apply them, etc.

Preceding this time was a brief attempt to use an Ajax flexible cable. (Carlos probably got his idea for a barrel scraper from this) which had a flat head

on it and when you lowered it to a closure the friction tightened it. However, the closure still had to be put in position by hand.

A mechanical genius, George Walburn, had a tomato factory in Auburn. George had previously been an *American Can* serviceman. George told Dad about some equipment for sale in Kokomo, one piece being a *Pneumatic Scale Company* screw (threaded) closure applicator.

We bought it along with some other equipment and George put together our first packing line. Compared to what we had had it was a jump into modern technology!

The screw cap was fast going out on pickles and replacing it was the *White* "twist-off." However, we liked the *Crown Cork and Seal* screw cap with the cut rubber ring and *Crown* had a new equally impressive (compared to the *White Cap*) machine to apply their screw cap, creating a vacuum and a tight seal.

So we told the young *White Cap* salesman we had made the decision to go with *Crown Cork*. He called and said several people from *White Cap* wanted to talk to us.

He, a senior salesman, one of their top engineers and a lay-out person flew to the old airport north of Auburn and before they were through with Dad and me they convinced us *White Cap* was the way to go.

It was a good thing because within a year there were no more *Crown* lids or equipment being sold to pickle or other vegetable canners.

*White Cap* also directed us to a modern stainless line for sale at the *CC Lang Company* in Baltimore. I went out to see it and we purchased it. Much of it is still in use today.

The *White Cap Company* sent in men to help our men in the installation and start-up. The *White Cap* people gave no end of free service, free belts and parts. It was a great company!



The personnel are still great, but when *White Cap* sold to *Continental Can* away went free parts, service became only occasional, leasing costs of machinery went up, etc...etc. They still make a fine closure, but do have several competitors at this time.

There are several things I remember from when the building burned; one was John Dilley telling Dad not to pay him anything for one week he helped. Also, Sam and Walter Keesler melted and poured metal to make new bearings for the relish cutter and wouldn't take anything for their work. John Hart, who had helped Dad do many things around the salt stations, got his sons, Donald and Charles, and did the concrete work as well as helping on the tile block laying. Hollis Dilley and "Jiggs" Butler were the other two masons.

The new 60' x 56' tile block building was finished in a couple of months. A boiler room out of tile was also built at the southwest corner. The roof support structure was all out of local native wood, mostly oak, which Dad had a lot of respect for. He used the same materials in '48 and '60 also. From a food plant standpoint it could have been better, but on the other hand, the only material otherwise available at that time would have been metal and the vinegar and salt atmosphere would have corroded it. As it is, here in 1996, the wooden trusses and joists are still holding up.

The new plant was a great improvement over the barn factory. A "sore" point to Mom and me, especially, was that local people still referred to the new factory as a barn and continued to do so for years.

One of the final jobs in the new construction was the pipe fitting for the boiler and related equipment using steam, and the general plumbing. Glen Bowen, a cousin of Dad's, took a week's leave from the Pennsylvania Railroad shops in Fort Wayne and did all of this for him. He and his wife, Lorena, moved in with Dad and Mom for a week. Glen repeated the favor in 1948 for the first addition

to the plant. This time Glen worked on weekends and I was the apprentice steam fitter and plumber.

In spite of the bad luck with the plant burning down in the fall of 1937, Ralph's bad luck wasn't over. He rented the first floor of a building in Spencerville, mostly for storage. That level opened out on C.R. 68, directly across from the old Spencerville gymnasium.

In January of 1939, about 14 months after the first fire, that whole block in Spencerville burned. The fire started on the south end of the block and the fire companies thought they had it under control, but all of a sudden the fire was out of control and spread to the north. Then, it was too late to get our stock out. Five buildings in all were destroyed..

We lost 125 barrels of dill pickles, 25 barrels of relish, 150 new empty barrels, many kegs and some other assorted stock. Coverage was estimated at one fourth of that total value.

Early in May of 1939 someone stole a large electric motor from Dad's St. Joe receiving station and he posted a \$25.00 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the party.

Late in May Dad was confined to bed due to a hemorrhage of a stomach ulcer. Little wonder!!

The sale of pickles continued to grow so the improved facility was a blessing. Dad would get a route started and then find someone to take it over. Sometimes he would buy a truck and sometimes the new route person would furnish a truck.

The first evidence I have of a party supplying his own truck is in June of 1933. Clarence Woodcox drove a new truck just purchased from Detroit to sell pickles. The truck bore the name "*St. Joe Valley Pickles.*" Years before, Clarence had been a teacher of Dad's. Years later, Clarence's son, Vance, who had retired



as Vice President of *Norge* and *RCA*, and who was very fond of our pickles, served me as a business consultant. The only cost was to provide transportation and out of pocket expenses for his trips from Atlanta to Ft. Wayne. Prior to Clarence using his new truck to sell for Dad, a newcomer to the St. Joe community, Nick Ridlen, sold pickles for Dad out of his own auto. This would have been in 1932 and was not too long a period. By 1933 Nick had established his own company, *The Ridlen Company*, and was selling canned goods and pickles.

H.K. Schondelmayer started operating a wholesale pickle truck under the trade name of *St. Joe Valley Brands, Mfg. by Ralph Sechler*. His truck was painted by John Woodcox to conform with the trucks already on the road. H.K. Schondelmayer preached for several years at the St. Joe Church of Christ. Many rural pastors of that era had to find something to augment their income from preaching.

Schondelmayer had an accident one day which could have been very serious. He had carried several cases of pickles into the restaurant, which was poorly lighted in the back, and put them on shelves made for that purpose. On coming in with another case, however, the owner had raised the door in the floor leading to stairs going to the basement. Harvey didn't know this and when he walked into the restaurant he took the usual step and fell to the basement! I guess the only thing broken was the case of pickles.

I can relate to this with a basement experience I had years later. I was of high school age and it was one of my summer trips to Fort Wayne. I took a 15-gallon keg of sweet pickles out of the truck and set it on the sidewalk next to a big steel door in the sidewalk. I went into the original Belmont Flagship which was a nice restaurant/liquor store on Calhoun Street and asked for help to get the keg into the sidewalk opening.

The black janitor was sent to help. He was to roll the keg to the opening and start it down a chute to me. He proceeded to bump the steel door which was standing on edge and it came down on my head, putting a big long gash in it. After getting help to stop the bleeding I drove the truck over to St. Joseph Hospital where I was stitched up before I went on about my deliveries.

In 1938 Dad purchased a new IHC truck. This time it was a new one and slightly larger. Another truck he bought was an IHC, with a big powerful motor, but not too big a truck. I remember how hot it would get inside the truck in the summer, whether I was using it to deliver finished product or to pick up fresh cucumbers from the farmers to deliver to the receiving stations.

In 1941, Mac Hatch started driving a panel truck to be used in his delivery service for Dad. He must have been pretty successful as he, his wife, and daughter Vivienne, were soon locating in Dunkirk, Ohio from where he serviced his customers with *St. Joe Valley Pickles*. This made five trucks going out from St. Joe.

Dad's nephews, Robert Sechler and John Dilley, helped him off and on for a number of years driving truck. Bob left once to work for *McCray* at Kendallville, came back and left again to work at the *Harvester*. After WW II he returned and spent his final years doing various things around the plant including once a week delivery to Fort Wayne. John didn't work any more in the pickle business after he left to work at Dana.

One thing I remember enjoying was riding with Bob "all the way to Chicago" to pick up eight (all the truck could hold) barrels of vinegar at *Standard Brands*. That would be about 400 gallons. Now we get vinegar in tank trucks in loads of 5500 gallons.

Dad never felt he needed a larger truck to haul in supplies such as sugar, glass, vinegar, or salt. So, he would use local people who had a truck. Among



them were Bill Hurni or John Coburn that I remember; and one from Hicksville that I can't remember. Of course, the one he used most and the longest was Carl Carpenter, a local farmer living close to the plant. I suppose Carl helped us from 1950-1975. It didn't matter what he was doing on the farm, he would leave it, check out his truck and then go on whatever mission we selected - a delivery or a pick-up of supplies. Many times I felt guilty, but he always wanted to help. Carl always had an interest which ran deeper than just driving a truck for us. He was a great PR man, and was always "talking up" our Company and its products.

One time Carl was going to Washington DC to attend a National Grange conference. He asked me if I would let him take a gift assortment to Ike. It was easier to say "yes" than to try and convince him it would be useless to try. However, a week or so later we received a letter from the White House, and signed by President Eisenhower, thanking us for the pickles!

Dad was using Stan Bice, who had a truck, on a more or less regular basis when I finished college and went into business full-time in 1948. Stan's truck was literally held together with bailing wire and I felt a poor advertisement for our firm. So, the first thing I did, as a contribution to the firm, was to save my money and buy a new Chevrolet cab forward design with an open bed. The bed was diamond deck plate made by Virgil Beck at Cedarville. It cost twice as much as I was counting on (\$500) but by transferring it to one chassis after another we were still getting some use out of it after 35 years. Actually, the truck was just like Stan's but new and nicely lettered. Of course, the driver we hired to drive it was Stan.

About this same time we decided to incorporate. Therefore, I received stock for the investment I had made in a truck.

Let's return to the 1930's for a while. As mentioned previously, Nick Ridlen left Dad and started his own business in St. Joe in direct competition.

Apparently things didn't go too well as about a year later in March of 1934 the *Harbauer Company* secured a judgment of \$179.00 in the DeKalb Circuit Court against Nick Ridlen on an account. N.W. Ketcham represented the plaintiff and the defendant defaulted. However, in the twelve to eighteen months it existed, the *Ridlen Company* had purchased a second-hand Ford truck and then had three trucks on the road selling canned goods and pickle products. It would appear that he had overextended financially at a time when the economy had not fully recovered from the depression,

In 1934 Wm. Strause had firmly established his company, *The Triangle Foods*, in St. Joe. Whether it was organized at a different location a year or two earlier I don't know. But, in 1934, it was located directly across the street from the Kinsey Hardware in "Izzy" Hursh's former general store. Later the building across the alley was remodeled and used for repacking, etc. to comply with health authorities. That would have been the *Harmon Meat Market* building.

In July of 1934 a near accident was reported near the Kinsey Store. The Strause truck was "cutting up capers". Harold Strause, his wife, and daughters of Rome city were here visiting the Wm. Strause family while he was working for the *Triangle Foods Company*. In December of 1934 *Triangle Foods* had a new Dodge truck to be used for hauling goods in bulk and after repacking was done, smaller trucks were used on wholesaling routes. The **Triangle Food** business was growing steadily. Then in April of 1935 Ted Strause and Nick Ridlen opened a wholesale office in Elkhart for the *Triangle Food Products* which was owned by Wm. Strause.

In December of 1935 W.D. Graber moved from Defiance, Ohio to Adrian, Michigan to be more centrally located in his sales territory for *Triangle Foods*. Mr. Graber was a son-in-law of Bill Strause.



In September of 1940 Ted Strause and his family moved to Camden, Michigan where he engaged in the wholesale pickle and canned goods business. Ted had married Helen Tustison from the St. Joe area (a very close friend of my sister Louise through their 12 years of school).

In November of 1940 Wm. Strause remodeled his barn, making room for packing pickles. He planned to vacate the Hursh building as soon as he could. This move was due to some wholesale association requirements. In June of 1941 the pickle vats were moved from the Wm. Strause place to the Sechler salting station near the elevator. Sechler had increased acreage, needed more storage and Strause was phasing out this part of his business. In 1941 Richard Freeburn was working for Strause in sales. I am not sure when Strause quit doing business in St. Joe. I do know that my good friend Charlie Sharp helped Strause in the summer of 1942 before he left for the Air Corps.

I also know that Graber did some pickle packing and processing in Adrian, so I am inclined to think that during the war years there was a move from St. Joe to Adrian for the *Triangle Food Company*; whether or not Wm. Strause went I don't know. When I got out of college in 1948 Graber was still processing some in Adrian.

I report all of this on Dad's competitors because with St. Joe being so small it is kind of amazing that in 20 years it had the *Sears Company*, Ralph Sechler, Nick Ridlen, and then Wm. Strause all involved in the pickle business. Also, I might mention that Homer Bowser of Spencerville, a brother of Roy Bowser, a St. Joe businessman, became involved and eventually owned a pickle company in Xenia, Ohio.

I remember meeting Homer at a Chicago meeting around 1950. His company, the *Ohio Food Products*, made a pretty good line of pickles.

The middle 30's saw a number of things happen worthy of mentioning. Dad was always a sports fan and sponsored a basketball team. A sponsor only had to furnish cheap jerseys, sometimes with his name on them, and sometimes just a number. Dad sold a lot of pickles in Fort Wayne and one of his accounts was the *Scott Bowling Alley* owned by Everett Scott, the former Yankee star shortstop. Working with his dad was "Scotty" or Everett Scott Jr. who had just graduated from North Side and was on their team that went to Indianapolis to the Final 16.

January of 1934 was the first appearance on the St. Joe floor of Scotty, Bob Irons, and Tommy Haught of North side, along with Dave Williams, Fred Quance, and Harley Trovinger of Auburn and George Wade of St. Joe.

The mix of ball players changed all the time during the next 3 or 4 years but Tommy Haught, the captain, and Bob Irons were always there. They called St. Joe their "lucky" floor. The size of the floor and gym would have been the same as in the movie The Hoosiers.

After winning the Markle Tournament in 1938 the team went to Indianapolis, the next level of the AAU. However, the whole team was made up of new players, but they used the names of the ones who had just won at Markle. Reason? In the 30's, if a man was lucky enough to have a job, he didn't ask for or take a day off to play basketball. So, the Indianapolis team was pretty much kids who had just graduated from high school. Three I remember were Jim Hilgeman from South Side, Red Gatton from North side, and Bart Quinn from Central Catholic. The new team was eliminated in the second round.

I am rather reluctant to start naming people who worked in the plant for Dad in the 30's, for fear of leaving out someone. However, I feel I should mention several ladies besides Mrs. Martin. Hazel Baltz would have been one key person, as were Odessa Baily, and Victoria Means. Several men I should mention include Cecil Shilling, Louis Bleeks as well as Frank White, Bob Sechler, and



John Dilley; the latter two drove truck part of the time. Bob Musser came to work in 1940, but Uncle Sam didn't let him stay very long.

Bob entered the service in 1942. I remember the little potluck the ladies arranged to show their good wishes for Bob. It was held under the boxelder tree, which still stands at the southwest corner of the office (house). This was the first one, of many, potlucks the pickle packers have promoted through the years.

Six years later would have been the first of the Christmas parties which are still taking place.

In 1948 the new building contained a small dining room right where the present one is located.

We had a new pick-up truck (our first ever) and Dad had parked it between the house and factory while he attended the Christmas party. He had eight picnic hams in it that were to be used as gifts for some non-employees, who he felt the company owed recognition.

Right after the party he came to me and wanted to know what I had done with the hams - which I didn't know he had! It turned out my big lovable dog, Chuck, had jumped into the pick-up eight times, gotten a ham each time and took it somewhere on the grounds and buried it. We found most of them buried in the snow, under straw, etc. north, south, and west! We never did find two of them.

During the war years, a lot of young men that had worked for Dad entered the military. Most of them had worked only a summer or two during high school but three who had worked full time were Bob Musser, Louis Bleeks and Gerald Gee. Gerald Gee was in the Battle of the Bulge and Bob Musser was in Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army which came to the rescue of those at Bastogne.

Charles Hart was never on our payroll, but helped his dad and brother build our factory after the fire. His dad, John, and brother, Don, were on the payroll at various times. Charles had been one of the leaders in the scout troop I was in.

Soon after the factory was built in 1937 Charles joined the Army. Peace time promotion was slow but by the time December 7, 1941 came, Charles had become a lieutenant and by the time the war was over he was a Lt. Colonel. Charles, like my dad, spent his time teaching in OCS.

Another person in the military was Bob Berry, later in this history to be talked about at great length. Bob was in the Navy as Lt. Commander.

I was not in the military. In 1943 I came home from Wittenberg to join the army. I was made 4-F because of my eyes. In 1944 I found I could get into the Merchant Marine, which I joined.

In total numbers the group going into a service was not too big, but it represented most of Dad's male employees. Between the loss of these men as well as a couple of others going to industry during the war years, the rationing of sugar and some other key supplies, Dad struggled during this time

After WW II, Louis Bleeks brought an army jeep home with him. We bought it from him and used it to dust crops; the four wheel drive enabled us to get through the soft muck we grew pickles on at that time. Eventually we discontinued dusting (in favor of spraying) and I took the jeep over for a recreational vehicle and used it into the 60's. It provided a lot of fun for the family.

About the time of the Berlin blockade John DePew was working for us. He joined the Air Force and was killed when his helicopter crashed in Greenland.

During the blockade, which escalated into the cold War, not only was DePew Killed, but Don Sechler was called by the National Guard and sent to France.

Then when Vietnam escalated, we had a young man from Spencerville, James Fore, who joined the Marines. Jim stepped on a landmine and died as a



result of his wounds. I sat with his parents for a long time on Christmas Eve. They had just received word that day of his death.

Gary Sible, who had worked five summers for us while going to college, became a navigator on a B 52, making many flights over Vietnam. Once while taking off on Guam, his plane crashed. Gary received a fractured ankle and the co-pilot was killed. After Vietnam Gary worked (and is still working) for us part-time, so after so many years I consider him a full-time employee.

Our percentages weren't so good with seven involved, two killed and one hurt.

My sister, Louise, upon graduation from high school in 1937, enrolled at International Business College in Fort Wayne. When she graduated, she and Dad thought it would be nice to utilize her training in the office and relieve Dad of that type of work.

It became obvious that the business did not need one with her training, full-time, so she took a job at the Duemling Clinic in Fort Wayne as secretary for Dr. Werner Duemling. After a couple of years she developed an interest for something in the medical field. She enrolled in the Indiana University School of Nursing -a three-year course.

In her senior year, one of her classmates introduced her to a young man who had just been discharged from the Air Corps where he had been a Crew Chief in the Air Transport Command. They were married as soon as she finished school and moved to St. Joe where Louise continued in nursing. Carlos Church, her husband, became involved in construction. One of the early jobs he helped on was building an addition to the pickle plant. It wasn't too long after that, he went to work in the plant and eventually became our first, full-time maintenance person. He also did some part-time farming and ended his career with the pickle company as manager of the general farming operation.

Hispanics were very much a part of our operations, both in the field and in the plant. Our first and longest lasting association was with the Floyd Ortiz family. Floyd had come with his family to Paulding, Ohio to work for the *Paulding Sugar Beet Co.* The sugar company's field man, John Dierk, told Dad if he would raise some beets, he would send over a real good family and also send some housing. It looked like the two crops (pickles & beets) would work together so Dad took him up on the offer. This was in 1944.

You might say the relationship is still lasting as just about all of the 14 children worked for us in the field, and usually after they became 16, they went to work in the factory. A number of the grandchildren have worked some and you can bet, when the pepper and tomato plants come in the spring, you will see a number of Ortiz descendants (second, third, and fourth generationss) helping and having a lot of fun.

Floyd eventually pruchased an 80-acre farm east of St. Joe, very near the Ohio border. I don't know whether the site selection has anything to do with the fact their Catholic Church was just 4 miles east or not, but I seldom walked up to Floyd in the field but what he didn't reach in his pocket and pull out a stone he had just found, which would have a figure of Christ, a cross, or some other religious item on it. Sometimes I had a little trouble discerning it, but he would convince me!! As this history is being brought to a close in June of 1996, I wanted to mention that on going to the field the week of May 20, 1996, I found the two ladies riding the pepper planter to be Dorothy Chew, daughter of Floyd, and Betty Ortiz, daughter-in-law of Floyd—both grandmothers, but young at heart!

To get workers from Mexico one had to start with our U.S. Department of Labor which in turn worked with Mexico's Department of Interior. These workers were called Braceros and it was a program which began during the Korean War to alleviate farm worker shortages. A short description is that after all papers had



been signed and approved you received your contingent of male workers on the day you wanted them. They usually started to work the day after arrival. They were excellent workers!! Housing costs were at a minimum because we were not providing space for nonproductive women and children.

Most of the workers' money was sent home by air mail. The first week's pay was probably split between family and themselves as they needed clothes. The Braceros would arrive with sandals made of rubber tires, binder twine for belts, numerous patches on their clothes, etc.

When they were ready to return, the bus hauling them would have, stacked high on top, bicycles and sewing machines, along with other items bought for their wives and kids.

Our camp for them consisted of an old Sechler farm house and some of the sugar beet Quonset housing which had been given to us.

One evening toward the end of the first year's stay, we went up to the camp and on the rather large metal roof of the lean-to, over the concrete patio, the Braceros had painted in large letters "Rancho Allegre", or "Happy Ranch". Sometimes little things in business can mean a lot - this made us all feel good.

Another thing on the Braceros; most of them wanted to come back the next year. Dad limited the repeats to five. One of them was named Aurellio Rivera. He was one of those few unforgettable nice people you meet in a lifetime.

Aurellio had been here only two or three days when he got a call to come home to Mexico because his wife and several children were involved in an accident. I was thinking it was a ruse to get him back to stay, and after spending considerable money on fees, transportation, insurance, advances on arrival, and then buying him air fare to go back, I was quite resentful. But, I didn't know Aurellio well. Can you believe that within five days he was back and from a province half way down into Mexico. His wife and one child had been killed and

buried. Nevertheless, he turned right around and came back. He brought me a very nice sombrero, which is still hanging in my office. Thank goodness it was a little small for me to wear or it probably wouldn't still be here.

Aurellio would ride with me frequently and would work so hard at trying to improve my Spanish. He was a very patient person, but in spite of being fair at the vocabulary and grammar, I was never good at speaking or understanding the language.

The third year Aurellio wanted to return. The Mexican government no longer allowed "specials"- the program in which we got the five back the second year. He kept trying and we would send him money for this official, then for that official. Finally, we had to give up. The officials were asking Aurellio for bribes, but they would never deliver. It was really sad.

The most Braceros we had in one year was 65. That year upon their arrival, Dad, Mom, and good friends, Pastor Baker and wife, and Louise prepared a lot of food for their first evening meal. This no doubt got things off to a good start.

The Mexican contribution would not be complete without mentioning the Rosalio Luna family. In late July of 1964 a lady came to my office asking if we had any work. They had been on the way to Wisconsin to work in pickles. Taking a side trip through Indianapolis on the way to Decatur one of their sons had been hit by a taxi and badly hurt. They wanted to be able to return with him to the Riley Hospital for frequent checks and therefore, wanted to stay in Indiana. My first response was to say we didn't have work for another family. Paula, the mother, thanked me for my time, and went out to the truck in which they were traveling. Something told me (The good Lord, I think) to reconsider. I went out immediately and said I would show them the fields and see if Rosalio, husband and father, thought there would be enough work for everyone.



This was the start of a 30-year (and still going) relationship. Rosalio and Paula stopped coming a few years ago, but two of their sons and families still come. Their children are now starting work also. Rosalio, Jr. and Juan's families take care of and harvest all of our peppers, and of course, the green tomatoes. Plus, we always have some pickles to keep them busy full time. It's been a great relationship.

Paula is one of the finest people I have ever known! I always thought she and Rosalio had a very fine and loving relationship, but, she "ran" the family.

One instance to mention is that when Junior didn't come with them one summer she seemed quite concerned. One day after several weeks here, she wanted to go back to Weslaco. Fran took her to the airport. It seems that Junior had gotten mixed up with a "bad woman" in Paula's estimation. She probably spent all the money she and Rosalio had accumulated to date for the sudden decision to make that round trip. It paid off, however, as today Junior is the leader of the Luna group and has a lovely wife and children. His brother, Juan, also has a lovely wife and fine family. Their wives are sisters, incidentally. To sum it all up, we have had extraordinary relationships with our field workers!

Not all the Mexican contacts have such pleasant memories. Our area through the 1950's still had a lot of tomato canning companies. Ones I remember were in Waterloo, Ashley, Butler, Edon (2), Edgerton, Blakesless, and Hicksville, to name a few. The tomato harvest followed very close to the pickle harvest, actually overlapping a week or ten days. Dad would bend over backwards to keep his people in work, oftentimes at his expense.

Nevertheless, literally in the dark of the night, the "raiders" from the tomato canners would come into our camps and coax our help into leaving. As any business person knows, the pickles that didn't get harvested on account of this,

probably represented our profit. All those harvested to that point merely took care of production costs for the crop.

I really resented this situation. You couldn't blame the workers for wanting to insure that they had another month's work. But the tomato men who were scared that another tomato canner would get our help before they did, could have given us some consideration. A simple handshake could have seen that our needs were met also.

Sales efforts in the early years of the business consisted of our trucks with a driver selling food service. This is all covered in the forepart of this history. Later, about 1948, we started emphasizing the retail items.

About 1953, realizing we had more production capacity than was being used, and looking at ways to increase sales, we again put a food service truck on the road. This venture was pioneered by Jim Brown, a friend of mine from DePauw.

Jim had enough success that we bought a new truck. The problem with this venture was that we did not want to alienate our food service distributors. Therefore, Jim had to kind of gerrymander his routes to avoid conflict, and soon found this to be an expensive form of distribution. We finally abandoned the idea of having our own food service routes in the midst of distributors selling our pickles.

Another contribution Jim made at this time was to help develop **Fresh Pack Pickles** for Sechler. Art Lyon had been requesting this type of pickle for some time.

Jim and I went to Muncie to talk to Fred Dellwo, the head of food technology at *Ball Brothers*. Fred was quite knowledgeable on this product and gave Jim and me all the technical information he had. Later we cross-checked certain information with Joe Basillio of the *White Cap Company* who was also an



expert in the field of pasteurized pickles (fresh pack). For the next harvest season Jim put all of this together and we made our first **Bread and Butter, Kosher Spears, and Polish Dills.**

In 1949 I went out into various cities-mostly in Northwest Ohio - to "test the water," for having a full-time salesperson. I had pretty good results, so after talking it over with Dad, I contacted Arthur Lyon.

Arthur had owned and operated a grocery store in St. Joe, pretty much right out of high school. This would have been 1941-1943. He and Dad liked each other, but after several years he sold his store to go to work for *Marhoeffer Meats*. Art told Dad if he ever wanted a salesman, he would like to be considered. Art was still interested when I contacted him and he went to work for our company. This lasted for over 40 years. Art covered a lot of territory, being the only salesman working out of the plant. The super market changed drastically during those years, going from very small stores to very large stores. Many of the "seeds" Art sowed flourished and we owe a lot to his efforts.

Another person who made a significant contribution to retail sales was John R. Berry. Bob came into the Fort Wayne area a short while before World War II. He was a salesman for *Monarch Finer Foods*, a quality manufacturer and wholesaler of a full line of canned foods, coffee, tea, etc.

While on the road for *Monarch*, Bob continued seeing large displays of our pickles in and around Fort Wayne, but not very far out in his territory.

One day Bob approached Dad about selling *St. Joe Valley Pickles* on the side - "moonlighting." Dad said "okay." Bob got off to a successful start but then WW II started and he was called up. He went into the Navy Air Corps and several years later was discharged as a Lt. Commander. He returned to *Monarch*, but was assigned to the Chicago area. Seventeen or eighteen years passed without hearing anything from Bob. One day, after dad had died, I had a call from Bob wanting to

talk to me. He still was "sold" on our line of pickle and wanted to sell them in the Chicago market. After much discussion we agreed to an arrangement that over the next several years was modified several times to make for a mutually beneficial endeavor.

Bob, himself, and his approach to selling our pickles was unique. He was in a big and tough market. There were four or five major wholesalers who tried to control their members by requiring them to buy only of the "house." Bob would go after the really financially strong markets, regardless of what group they were affiliated with - convince them of our quality and unique products and then wouldn't sell to the store unless the owner would buy at least 40 different *Sechler's* items! The store being financially strong could buck the house and do this. Of course, Bob was not always successful, but he was successful enough that he was able to live comfortably from the about fifty stores he sold to.

Bob's health wasn't good during those years and this prevented us from expanding on his expertise in selling, building more sales, and having an organization there under his direct supervision.

Another "moonlighter" who contributed to sales was Lou Mead. Lou had spent around 30 years with *Aunt Jane's Pickles* and became their national sales manager. Soon after that *Aunt Jane* sold to *Bordens*. Lou left and went to work for another pickle company by the name of *Safie Food Products*.

Several years went by and one day Lou called me to see if we would run 200 cases of gallon hamburger dills for a valued customer of his. *Safie* wouldn't stop their pepper pack to run the 200 cases. I said we could and would do it for him. Then I suggested that we might be interested in some more business if he could throw some our way. We were pretty weak in the Toledo area and in Michigan. This was Lou's home and he was familiar with many potential customers.



Over the next 7-8 years, Lou got us some nice business. He succeeded in getting the Tony Packo family interested in talking to us. First, we furnished them with pepper chunks in 5 gallon pails which they mixed with pickle chunks bought from another dealer. Then, we sold them both products. After starting this, they wanted us to mix and ship that product. They were using the bulk to put in a side dish and handpacking in quart jars to sell at the cash register.

Eventually the business evolved into our packing the original product for Packo's. Then over the years, between their ideas for product and our ideas for product, the line expanded. With Packo's energy devoted to marketing, the Tony Packo label is quite well distributed in the Midwest today.

John Garns, who was third generation of a firm that had sold our pickles through the three generations, came to work for us several years after the *Garns Company* liquidated. John continued to build onto many of the accounts that Art Lyon and Lou Mead had started. John also added a number of profitable new accounts.

On the subject of "moonlighting," mentioned above in Lou Mead's and Bob Berry's account, the first experience was with Curt Roney who eventually became my brother-in-law by his wife, Erska, being a sister to my wife, Frances.

Curt was working in sales for **Remington Arms** in Connecticut the latter part of the 1940's. Curt talked to Dad about selling pickles in Connecticut and still working for *Remington*. Dad okayed the venture and Curt made a number of nice sales to top quality stores. However, Curt started to get promotions which required moving to various parts of the United States and had to give up pickles. He eventually became head of sales for *Remington* for the whole United States.

I couldn't close this segment on sales without mentioning two food brokers who did so much more for *Sechler's* than sell for the 5% commission.

One was Al Meyer in Cincinnati. Al liked our pickles so well and believed in the possibility there, that he hired a salesman just to sell Sechler pickles. His name was Wolcott Spencer. Our driver would unload the pickles in Spencer's basement once a month. Then Spencer would go around in his car sampling and selling a case or two at a time. After several years, Al Meyer found a distributor...*The Freeman Brothers*, who took the line on and developed it.

The other broker was Carl Wilson in Indianapolis. Carl also had much faith in the product, and hired a salesman, Lester Rowell, to sell just *Sechler's* pickles. Eventually, Carl was the first to put us into a public warehouse, from which orders to individual stores were shipped and we no longer had to put up drop shipments for our truck to deliver to stores throughout Indiana. After a few years he succeeded in getting a poultry distributor to take on our line of pickles and thus ended the rather expensive public warehouse relationship.

An interesting thing happened with the distributor. He gave up the poultry and egg business. He had worked out something with *Kroger* where he added specialty products to his line in addition to *Sechler's* pickles. He had innovations like pre-pricing in his distribution warehouse, splitting cases (like some small wagon jobbers did years before) and generally adding sophistication and modern technology to the specialty distributor type of distribution. He was delivering pickles to *Kroger* as far away as western Pennsylvania and a few points in western New York state.

#### In Summary of Sales:

##### 1. Food Service Sales

We had a number of years of food service sales by Dad, then by our own drivers and our trucks, or by men who had their own trucks.

##### 2. Retail Sales



Our retail sales in Northeast Indiana were developed by wagon jobbers, the earliest ones being LaBrash in Fort Wayne, Garns in Auburn, Stanz in south Bend, and *Allen County Foods* in Fort Wayne.

### 3. Brokers

Most of the rest of the retail sales were developed by men like Carl Wilson and Al Meyer, who had faith in our product and put their own money into it; or by several individuals who may not have had money to invest, but were "sold" on the product and wanted very much to sell it.

### 4. Retail and Mail Order Sales from the Factory.

Long before the concept of factory outlets, we were selling pickles to consumers who could not find them in stores in their hometown. "Word of mouth" was a big thing for us. Especially Dad and I (if I wasn't in school or in the service) would open a barrel of this or that kind of pickle and pack them right in front of the customer. Of course this, although not planned, lent "romance" to the fact the customer had stumbled onto something most of his friends still didn't know about.

Another thing which added impetus to that was that in 1939-40 Mrs. Carl Akins opened her "tea room" in St. Joe. What she had done was turn the whole downstairs of her house into rooms for serving home-fried chicken, and all the good things that went with it. She became famous in DeKalb County and other points nearby. Her key condiment was **St. Joe Valley Cinnamon Chips**. People eating them wanted to know where she got them, and it was only 1 ½ mile north! They came to the factory and found other varieties including **Raisin Crispies**, **Sweet Mixed**, **Sweet Dill Wafers**, and finally in 1940, **Candied Orange Strips**.

In the war years, with sugar rationing on us, Dad and Mom started a pickle packing rationing program. People had to place an order which would be filled when we had enough sugar to make "their" pickles. Mom kept a meticulous card

system for about six years. She used to tell about one man who had waited for his card from her telling him his order was ready for pick up. The day came when he could come get the order, and on his way back to the car, he dropped a gallon of **Raisin Crispies** and broke it. She had figured so close on what was available when she mailed the cards that she couldn't give (sell) a replacement. This bothered her for years as she was a very conscientious person.

A contributing factor to this "tragedy" was that there probably was no carton available to put his purchase in. Cardboard was one of the many items in short supply during WW II.

A slight obstacle we had to overcome in the early "factory outlet" concept was my favorite pet of all time, Billy the goat. Billy ran loose around the house and plant. I could go on and on about his escapades to amuse us. But the thing that caused us trouble was his habit of getting on the roofs of visitors' cars. In those days, cars had a running board, a fender easily available to a goat from the running board, then a hood (the next step) and then the roof. Many of the roofs were still of the cloth variety. You can see we had to do something when he discovered how much fun it was to get on top a car.

This period of time also saw the start of a small mail order business. The first orders were from local customers wanting to send someone special a gallon of pickles. One of the plant men would tear apart a wooden box in which our closures and spices came to us in during the 1940's, then he would cut and fit a box to hold a gallon. We would pack wooden excelsior around the jar and it was ready.

In those years we shipped everything by Railway Express. This was the method until the 1950's when Railway Express pulled out of Auburn. Toward the latter part of this period we were able to get triple-walled corrugated and had several size cartons - 1 gallon, 2 gallon, and 4 gallon cartons made. These were



very satisfactory for Railway Express. We even had some cartons made out of double walled corrugated for an assortment of pint-size containers. We added a light weight sleeve for some extra protection and this was all fine and dandy for the Railway Express.

When we were finally forced to ship by Parcel Post, our whole mail order program had to change. We couldn't afford the type of packaging needed for the heavier gallons to protect them from rough handling, so we cut out gallon and half gallon shipments entirely. The multiple pint carton which worked for express was too fragile for parcel post. The result was to have cartons which were very tough and protective, made for various multiples of pint jars. We thought it would be too expensive and people would just not order. But it didn't seem to make any difference, as they continued to order.

In the late 70's and early 80's, Fran Sechler (wife of Frank) did a lot to make both the retail room and mail order business an important part of the overall sales effort. Up to that time it was certainly an interesting part - getting letters from distant places, having people come in and tell you how far they had come to get the pickles, etc. But, with Fran's care and nurturing, and friendly treatment of everyone, it finally became a profitable part of the business.

## 5. Fund Raisers

In 1958 Pastor Sapp from the Angola First United Methodist Church asked Dad if he would let the church start selling *Sechler's* pickles as a fund raiser. Again, Dad said, "Okay." This was the start of what has become a very interesting program with over 200 fund raisers on our mailing list.

At first there were predictions and warnings that it would alienate our supermarkets. This fear was especially felt by the *Stanz Company of South Bend*, because soon after Angola, other Methodist churches in Goshen and Elkhart

started selling. But, a few years after that, *Stanz* became our largest distributor and held that position until they decided to concentrate on food service.

Sometimes it worked in another way. St. Lukes in Kokomo became our largest fund raiser. When St. Lukes started selling pickles we had very poor distribution in Kokomo at the supermarket level. Now, every store in Kokomo has some *Sechler's* pickles.

Our second largest fund raiser was Messiah in Muncie. Several times when Messiah started, I would put their order in the trunk and back seat of my car, as I had friends to visit in Muncie. The friends were Ruth and Frank Stevenson. Frank was pastor of Trinity Lutheran in Muncie. Within a few years we were delivering in our semi - maybe not a full load - but a big load.

Nearly all of our fund raisers picked up at the plant, as this is one way volunteers from the membership can add to the profitability of the project by saving freight costs.

## 6. Ingredient Sales

Another type of sales is our valued ingredient sales. Although this is usually a diced  $\frac{1}{4}$  cube sweet pickle going to meat packers for their pickle loaf, we also sell the same product, or variations of it, to salad makers and delis. We also sell sweet pickle juice, sweet relish, and lesser amounts of other items.

Our relationship with one of our buyers - *Peter Eckrich & Sons*, now *Armour-Swift-Eckrich*, goes back almost 60 years. I have a letter Dad wrote to Mother in 1937 in which he states he delivered a load of pickles to *Eckrich* the day before. Granted, those pickles were **Kosher Dills**, in gallon glass to be sold off their trucks to meat markets. But, taking that business into consideration, except for two years in the 50's, the relationship has been continuous and stimulating. With *Eckrich* being close by, it was fairly easy to work with them. Their technical people were quite helpful. One difficult time was during the war



when sugar was rationed. They got us some corn syrup in 600# wooden casks to mix with sugar to extend what we could do. That was hard work as we had no heavy equipment to handle the product.

*Eckrich* also helped us evolve from the "split sweet pickle" that we first gave them and which they had to chop further, to the "shoe-string" pickle, which we ran through our first Urshel slicer twice. It worked fairly well, but finally they asked if we could improve the cut. After talking to Urshcel, I took over to Valparaiso several containers of whole pickles. They set up a couple dicers in their lab, and made adjustments at one point. I took the different cut products to *Eckrich* and one was selected. That has been over 30 years ago, and has become our standard product with only flavor, acid, and sugar variations for different customers.

#### 7. Exports

We do a little bit of this into Malaysia. We would like more of the export business, but haven't had the right formula for getting this done in volume.

#### 8. Private Label

In conclusion, one can see we have tried many ways to sell our product over the years. In the past, we have sold very little under private label. The first was for the prestigious *S.S. Pierce Company* in Boston. We packed seven of our products under their labels until *Pierce* finally sold out and the large grocery line they had was discontinued.

The *Tony Packo* account is private label, and a very good line of products, which for the most part has been kept separate in taste, appearance, and uniqueness from the product under the *Sechler* label. No other retail private label has been very successful and we try to discourage this business. Food service items are easier to get into private label production, but other than a couple accounts, we haven't encouraged that either.

Currently we are trying to get into upscale accounts - gourmet or just specialty food outlets - in what we call a fringe area. These would be outside our regular marketing areas, but there has always been some overlapping in sales among our distributors and probably always will be. The jury is still out on this type of customer, but there has been some progress and hopefully it will be a success!!

As I've said on several occasions, it is a little unfair to name individuals who have made a significant contribution, because so many have done this, and some might be slighted. So, I will shorten my list to a category of those in the 35 + years of service.

Both Don Sechler and John Mason fit in the 35 + category. Don has pretty well mastered the mechanical and structural knowledge necessary to keep a plant of our size running. It has always been a demanding job. In recent years the increasing scope of regulatory agencies, such as the EPA, OSHA, FDA, and the Indiana State Board of Health, has made it even more demanding. Don does not have an engineering degree, but we call him our plant engineer, as we think he deserves the title.

John Mason was hired by Dad to be an assistant on the various farm operations for vegetable crops. Dad had been looking after that part of the business. Within a couple years Dad passed away and John had the full responsibility. After a few more years, during which time nearly all cucumber acreage had been diverted from our fields to large tomato growers, we made another change.

The large growers were excellent and very knowledgeable vegetable growers. After a couple of years experience, they didn't really need much help from *Sechler's*. On the other hand our business had grown to the point where it



was very difficult for me to look after the plant operation as well as managing everything else.

I saw in John the possibility of becoming our first plant manager; not a plant manager in the sense of budgeting for a profit, etc., but one who was good with the employees, scheduling, seeing that various things were done regardless of the hour, and generally relieving me of the things I had been doing.

This, for John, was a big change in a few years. He went from his own farming to working for a salary as a fieldman, to working in the plant with more and completely different responsibilities. He took a few days to think it over, but accepted my request. It worked out quite well.

In addition to recognition of the 35-year and longer service, I should mention the 30-year and longer: Blas Zuniga, foreman of the processing room, and Jim Hudson, warehouse manager and traffic manager have both contributed substantially.

The other thing I want to do is recognize "three generation families" who have worked for us. Hopefully I won't overlook any of these.

First, I'll recognize the Roy Reidenbach family. Roy retired from *Standard Oil* and asked Dad about summer work. Roy built almost all of our tank yard docking. This was quite an undertaking! His daughter, Frances, is my wife, and her son, Mike, who as an art illustrator, has contributed our logo and for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, produced our video.

The workers in the Collins family were Ruth Collins, husband Dale, daughters Lou and Cheryl, and grand-daughters and grandson.

The members of the Bernida Vinson family who worked were Bernida, sons Chuck and Jerry and several daughters and Jerry's children and wife, Carolyn.

Mrs. Frank Washler, daughter Gloria, and Gloria's daughter, Bobbie Scott have all been pickle factory workers.

Dale Walters and four sons have worked at the factory including Burmell, whose son also worked one summer. Here I'll make special mention of Burmell Walters, who was in charge of the brining operation 22 years. Most of those years represented commuting from Nappanee where he taught school. He came on Monday, went home on Wednesday evening, came back on Thursday and went back home Saturday evening. His was a most significant and quality contribution. Never was any brine stock lost in that period.

Another three generation family was that of Bill Hurni. Bill was never on the regular payroll but often did things for Dad, such as driving truck, etc. His daughters Jean, Leila, and Barb, and most of their kids have worked at *Sechler's* for a summer or two.

The Arnett family I am calling a 5-generation family! Mrs. Pearl Arnett did not work for us, but she was one of Dad's best customers as she owned the Pontiac Café in Fort Wayne, and bought pickles, mainly **Sweet Dill Wafers** and **Sweet Relish**, throughout the 1930's and into the 1940's.

Toward the end of WW II Dad told Mrs. Pearl Arnett about a farm for sale just north of the factory and across the road. She and her husband bought it and moved to St. Joe. Her son, Russell, bought a farm a half mile east of the factory. Russell did most of the concrete work around the tank yard as it was being built. Also, he was our tenant farmer for years.

When WW II was over Russell's son, Charles "Charlie," a former Marine went to work full time for Dad and today Charlie's son, Chuck, is the farm manager. Chuck's daughter, Kathy, his wife, uncles, and aunts have worked for us. So, with the close and important connection of Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ Arnett, Russell's independent contract work, Charlie, Chuck, and Kathy, I feel we have a 5 - generation family!



My own career started out by making a choice between picking strawberries at a neighbor's with my friends, or hoeing pickles at home. The choice, however, wasn't mine to make. Dad made it for me. He anticipated my choice and met me in the drive and asked me where I was going? When I said "to pick strawberries," he said, "No, you aren't, you go out there in that pickle field and start hoeing!"

By the time I reached college age, however, he never again tried to direct my career choice. After having some business courses and some science courses, I decided I much preferred the science. At the end of my sophomore year, Frank White was in the hospital as a result of an injury he had suffered at the plant, and I went to visit him. After preliminary conversation he asked me what I was studying. I told him premedical studies. He exclaimed loudly, "What, you aren't going to go into the pickle business!"

As I was just about to go into the Merchant Marines, I had a lot of time to think it over. A couple years later I entered DePauw and elected to get a major in economics. By then I had a very great desire to get college over and get into the pickle business. Frank had made his point. One of the reasons back of his charge to me probably was the fact that between my sophomore and junior year of high school, he decided it was time he taught me the secrets of making pickles. Frank had been brought up in the *H.J. Heinz Company*. Company secrets, recipes, formulas, procedures, etc. were closely guarded and Frank was a very loyal company man; we never had an employee more so! Even if a fellow employee came around when Frank was doing certain things, he would look disdainful and stop what he was doing.

So, he had taken a very big step in his mind when he decided to teach me the "inside things." The injury that had taken him to a hospital room,, my subsequent visit, and the conversation we had, was certainly a turning point in my life's work.

During my high school years Dad was always giving me responsibilities. The hardest ones were probably those in my 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade years when he would hold me accountable for the work my peers did in the fields. Chastising me for the poor work in front of them happened all too frequently. It would bring tears to my eyes and I greatly resented it. There were some lighthearted happenings at this age, however. One I vividly remember occurred when Mother and Dad had gone away for the day and the work being done was for men, so I went fishing at the river nearby. The fellows saw me return. John Dilley came to the house to get me to show me "something." They were packing freshly cut dill weed in new distillery run whiskey barrels. Earlier that morning they had discovered that if they took the bung out of the barrel before they removed the head, alcohol fumes would emanate from the bung hole. The fumes were strong enough that the fellows could hold a lighted match to it and fire would shoot out 2 or 3 feet. They wanted to show me.

But this was the middle of the afternoon and the sun had heated up the barrel considerably. There was a much greater concentration of fumes than there had been in the morning when they had made their great discovery. John rested his elbow on top of the barrel, then he leaned over to light the fumes. There was a big bang that blew the lid out of the barrel in spite of the steel hoops holding it tightly in place and sending it as high as the factory. They always kidded me that by the time the lid came back down, my bicycle and I were both 100 feet away.

It wasn't too long after this that Dad and Mother returned. On hearing the account of what had happened, seeing that no one was seriously hurt, and only one barrel blown up, Dad had a good laugh over it all. John did have a stiff and sore elbow for several days as a result of the blown lid hitting it.



By the time I was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I was doing a man's work. I could "head" up barrels, dip pickles out of the big vats and do other hard work as well as the adults. I took great pride in the work.

Dad would also take me with him on the truck to deliver to restaurants in a 75-mile radius. I was a lot of help, and by the time I reached 16 he would let me take the truck myself and service the accounts in the summer. When I was still riding with and helping him, I especially liked the Fort Wayne routes, because the hamburgers were better and about once a week, around 1:00 p.m., he would drive by a theater (of which there were many) and let me out to see a movie while he finished the route.

I also recall the first years when Dad took me with him. I was quite young then, and on the way home in the hot truck I would stretch out on a couple cartons of pickles, put my head on his lap, and go to sleep.

The pickle seasons were especially hard work during this period of time as we didn't have any materials handling equipment. Pickles were put in burlap sacks at the farms and then hauled into the receiving and grading stations either at St. Joe or Fremont. We would empty the sacks onto the grader and the pickles would be sized to diameter (as now) and discharged into bushel crates. Crate and contents were 60 pounds.

We had no two-wheeled carts then, so we would set crates, one at a time on the scales, then carry one at a time to the vat where they were to be dumped. Or, we would carry the crates of pickles to the truck and take them to the other station, unload them, and carry them to the vat in that station. Dad didn't want to "spoil" me or anyone else by buying an "unneeded" two wheel cart. This practice continued until the late 40's or early 50's. I remember a good friend, Henry Ford, of Auburn stopping at the St. Joe station to see me and helping me load a truck load of graded pickles (about 200 crates) to haul to our plant where we had by then

erected a few tanks, and were on the way to establishing the tank yard that we have today.

Another bit of hard work was the handling of bulk salt. We would get a carload of about 40-50 tons before the season started. The "bin" was in the far corner of the station. I never could figure why it was there instead of right inside the entrance closest to the tracks. We would position the boxcar so we could make a ramp from the boxcar to the entrance to the station. Then, by means of a couple of wheel barrows we would start shoveling and wheeling from the car to the top of the bin way over to that far corner. I remember very well one day when Roy Maxwell, Bill Hurni, and I unloaded a 50-ton car in one day!

Then came the several months of "salting the tanks." We did this by getting down in the bin, filling 50-gallon buckets full and handing them up to the floor level for someone to carry to the tanks. Sometimes one person did both. I remember many times over the years, going to the station on Sunday morning with Dad. After testing the tanks, I would get in the bin, fill the buckets and hand them to him and he would put the salt in the tanks. Then, we would get in the vehicle and drive around to look at some of the fields. This would all be done before Sunday School and church!! This is a very pleasurable memory for me because when we were together like this we talked about the future of the pickle business and just general father-son kind of talk.

Today the salt is brought to us in tank trucks then blown into a silo. The bottom contains several feet of water and a pump arrangement enables us to pump 100% saturated brine anywhere in the tank yard. The salt added to continue bringing up the strength desired, is in bags which are lifted by a fork lift up to the top of the tank and then a little physical work is needed scattering the contents over the surface.



Going back a few paragraphs, we also graduated in material handling from the sacks and crate era for the fresh pickles to a fork lift with its multi-uses. The fork lift operator removes the field boxes brought in full of pickles and rotates it into a bin from which the pickles are fed into the grading system.

A this point in time (soon to change) we still use the same type of graders that we used in the 30's, except they are wider, in tandem, and every other belt goes to the left, every other goes to the right. This makes it possible to roll the 20 bushel field boxes under the grader discharge belts instead of using the old crates. The boxes of graded pickles then are rolled onto the scales and in turn are taken by the fork lifts to the vats and rotated in. About all of the grading program now, other than the fork lifts, can be, and usually is done by senior high school or college students.

Other hard work I was quite involved with was during the summers. After finishing my sophomore year, I would help Frank White in the sweetening room doing the handling of 100# bags of sugar, dipping the pickles into and out of the kettles, and heading up the barrels (putting the steel hoops on). This heading of barrels continued into the pickle season, at which time I would leave Frank's department on certain days to barrel up **Genuine Dill Pickles** and **Banana Peppers**.

We would get in two or three carloads of distillery run, fresh emptied whiskey barrels each summer. We had an old barn on the north side of the tracks where we would put them after unloading. The barn was just west of the present fertilizer sales in St. Joe, and was a lumber yard and lumber storage when I was a small boy. The lumber yard was a business whose owner also had a coal yard just to the east of where the fertilizer plant is located. He also owned the elevator which was on the far east edge of town. The old pickle station was just west of the elevator.

The barrels would have to be scraped to remove the charcoal. Then the barrels would be paraffined so the charcoal dust could not get into the peppers which would eventually be put into the barrels. Some of the barrels would get a very special shaving, scrubbed out instead of paraffined, and then used in the sweetening room. You couldn't use the paraffined barrels for sweet pickles as the warm sweet syrup would have melted the paraffin.

At first we had special hand tools to scrape with, up and down, and the tool fit the concave stave. Much later, Carlos Church had a round tool containing many thick blades made to fit on the end of a flexible shaft and the other end of the shaft was attached to an electric motor (how this would have complied with present day OSHA requirements, I don't really want to know). But it really speeded the program and no one got hurt. For a couple of summers our #1 barrel person was Joe Smith, the local school principal. An hour into the day, Joe would be black with charcoal dust, but he was usually by himself in the midst of some shade trees and seemed to like the job. When I would drive up to see how things were going, he always had a smile.

One last account of something I did when I was old enough to drive was to take a truck during the pickle season and pick up freshly picked pickles from farmers on the route toward Fremont. This was our remaining station, other than St. Joe. When I got there, I would sort the pickles by myself and put them in tanks, which I had opened upon arrival. After sorting any other pickles which were brought in, I would then close the tanks and start home, picking up pickles from farmers on another route. When I got to St. Joe, we would sort those pickles. I usually had help at St. Joe, because there was a lot more activity. We never left an open tank overnight in those days. All pickles had to be sorted, tanked, closed and salted before we went home. Many a time it was near midnight when we finished, making it a long hard day.



Being young and liking to get behind the wheel, the pickle pick-up routes were fun for me. I do remember an exception once. At my first or second stop, the farmer (not having any sacks) dumped all the pickles in a big pile, and they had had a big picking. I should have left them, but I didn't. At least Dad had a big laugh when I got back that night, and told him how the trip started. I had to pick them all up by myself and put them into sacks.

At Fremont there would be a few times when I had everything done I could think of to do. So, while I was waiting on another grower or two, that I expected, I would throw a bunch of burlap bags on an ancient table that had been used for hand sorting before I came along. I would lie down on the makeshift bed to take a nap. It was kind of reminiscent of the much earlier time when I had to hoe instead of picking strawberries. But if it was raining Dad would let me sleep or listen to a ballgame instead of finding some inside work for me.

I had a good friend from college days who took premed studies at the time I did. His name is George Hahn. George went ahead and got his MD. He lives in California and we still try to see each other every year or so. At that time George lived in Fort Wayne, and we were frequently together. He spent quite a bit of time at our house in the summer and one of the things he used to do was help me dust the pickles with an insecticide/fungicide powder. We had this Roots motorized blower on the back of the jeep with flexible metal tubes going down toward ground level and the trick was to have someone walk in back of the Jeep and try to keep the flexible tubes about the right height and directly over the small plants. This was George's job. Between the black muck and the dust we were applying, he would look as bad as Joe Smith would after scraping charcoal.

The reason I am bringing up George's name, however, is to mention an observation, and comment he made one day. At our age we frequently dated, or at

least talked about girls. One day, he very seriously advised me that I should try to find a girl who would be willing to wash jugs - pickle jars, that is!

George and I both grew up during the depression, when adults had to do things they would not have chosen to do in normal times. I think he recognized in Mother a person who would roll up her sleeves and do what was needed to help Dad along.

Another good friend of the early 1940's, besides George Hahn and Henry Ford, was Ed Wade. Ed stayed with Mother and Dad quite a bit while I was in the Merchant Marines. He not only was good company for them, but took care of one of my girl friends in St. Joe. Also, he entertained my dog by buzzing the grounds which caused the dog to chase the plane. One time the dog was running hard with its focus on Ed and crashed into a barrel..

Ed did make a direct contribution one time later by hauling me around when my leg was in a cast so I could check with some Amish farmers who had planted pickles for us.

That is the way the business started out. Dad bought pickles from various pickle packers and brought them to the house where Mother, oftentimes helped by Mrs. Martin, washed gallon jars and filled them with pickles in our back kitchen. The jars were then labeled.

A few years later, when Dad's business had grown, one of the salesmen got the urge to be an entrepreneur himself. When he picked up empty jars, if any had *St. Joe Valley* labels on them he set these in cartons which he would leave off at his house. Then he would buy some pickles in barrels and pack them into the jars with our labels.

Mother noted the decline in his sales and the absence of *St. Joe Valley* labeled jars coming in. Dad didn't want to believe it, but finally agreed with her



and gave her the responsibility of confronting him with the facts and firing him. This she did!

Another thing she did during the early stage of our business was to occasionally work for our neighbor, Hattie Widney, owner of the Widney Orchards (where I liked to pick strawberries.) Mother would work in the fall sorting apples. She told me the first thing she did, when she had saved enough money, was to buy Dad a warm coat to wear on his routes where he was trying to build up pickle sales. That may not sound like much, but they were very hard up and struggling to survive.

This was the same time period when she told me Santa wouldn't be around filling stockings this year. Problem was, I went to Sunday School and other kids were talking about what Santa left them and what they got in their stockings!! Of course, when I went home and told her, it was very hard on her. Mother and Dad had placed a nice gift on the fireplace mantel for me however!!

Mother's father was a very successful farmer who lived at Greenfield. This was 125 miles south of St. Joe. I never knew Grandfather when he could hear or see well. Nevertheless, one day he and Grandmother started to St. Joe in their Model T with a big wooden crate setting on the running board. In the crate was a half grown pig. This would have been a most welcome item!! They might never have made it, though because when they got to the Wabash crossing, just south of Spencerville (remember Grandpa couldn't see well) he turned up the track thinking it was the road. Someone helped him get back on the road and he continued to our house. The trip from Greenfield to St. Joe in those days made for a very long day.

There were many things about our house that never bothered me but were very difficult for Mother such as the threadbare rugs, old furniture in poor

condition, and no running water, etc. The things it took to keep the pickle business going had to come first and she knew and accepted it.

As the business slowly grew and it came to the time when we started to make the pickles at the plant instead of buying processed pickles, we needed steam. And as mentioned in the early part of this history, Dad sent Mother to an auction in Ohio to bid on a threshing machine steam engine.

Two things Mother did during the war years I remember well. One was her starting the card system for recording orders and mailing out notification for the person to come to the factory. I mentioned this above. The other thing was concerned with *Eckrich* getting Dad into the horseradish business. Most all the horseradish he made was for them and it went into jars that had to have the *Eckrich* label on them. Mother labeled thousands of these. She would label them before they were filled and this would be done by labeling, putting the empty jars back into the cases and when the horseradish day came, the fellows doing the packing would dump the labeled glass on the bench and start filling.

The filler for horseradish was one Dad had made out of stainless steel that was probably 12" in diameter, 30" upright and conical at the bottom. Then a wooden handle with a rubber stopper on the end would "with manpower," be the piston. The two fellows who were experts at filling the jars were Marcel Pugsley and Chalmer Shuff, each a year older than myself. My job was to grind the horseradish and mix it in a 20-gallon Hobart Mixer. When necessary, I could fill also, but never like Marcel and Chalmer, who could dispense 5 ½ oz. with speed and accuracy and not smear the jars! A favorite stunt Dad liked to pull was to offer to show an unsuspecting salesman the horseradish operation and then quietly maneuver him to a position between the grinding/mixing operation and the big exhaust fan!



Getting back to Mother's contributions, one was quite difficult for her, but she succeeded! In 1950 we incorporated and also borrowed money for expansion from the Auburn State Bank. We had no good bookkeeping system so John Haggerty, president of the bank, wanted us to get a CPA to go over our books. This led to the CPA saying we should have a bookkeeper and since it was going to cost money to hire one, Mother said she would try to do it. The CPA set up the program for her, and I was able to help her a little, but I didn't have the time or enough instructions to do a thorough job.

She would read my accounting books and work and read more and ask the CPA more questions, etc...etc. It was a tough job for her, but she stuck with it and did a good job. Anyone who has taken accounting courses can appreciate her contribution with having had no daily instruction from a teacher. Several times in subsequent years she taught girls in the office what she knew. One person I will mention (leaving out several) was Phyllis Baker Ritenour. The reason I mention Phyllis is that not only did she do steady work in the office for a couple of years, but after resigning to marry and raise a family, she came back a number of times to help in "emergency" situations. She was always ready and willing to help even for a limited time. This relationship was really valuable to us.

Another girl Mother taught her bookkeeping to was Ruth Collins. Ruth was with us 20 years and though I intended limiting persons mentioned to 35 years of service, it is not easy to overlook Ruth's contribution. Ruth trained Jan Weaver, out present office manager and administrative assistant.

I felt it imperative that I write these things concerning Mother's part in the business. As so often is the case, the man gets all or most of the recognition.

The next section of this history is an eulogy from the "editor's desk" written by Ted Haberkorn, publisher of the *St. Joe News* for 40 years. As you will see, Ralph was a good friend of Ted's.

## He Served

*"Well done, thou good and faithful servant."*

*How very appropriate are those words in describing the life of the late Ralph Sechler. How appropriate, for they tell his story not only as a businessman but as a private citizen. The reputation which his business efforts gained were not an accident; the products bearing his name were a reflection of a devotion to giving the best to others. The work a man does in his occupation, the goods and services he produces, show the true character of the man himself. Thus, "Sechler's" has become a trusted and respected name because the founder of the business by his efforts commanded trust and respect.*

*But Mr. Sechler's greatest service came not in commercial matters but in private matters. The Saint Joe community has been the beneficiary for many years of his steady quality of leadership which brought benefits to those living in the community. When worthy community projects have been undertaken, the name "Sechler" has always been at the top of the list as promoter and backer. No other source of leadership and financial support has equalled that of the late Mr. Sechler. In addition to practical assistance in the community, he was concerned for the general betterment of mankind, for the welfare of human beings. Because of his local service, he was sought out for projects affecting greater numbers. Many hours of his time were given in the past two years to the matter of schools, for instance. Even just a few weeks before his death, he had run for public office in the county. It is to be noted his health in the past few years would not appear to encourage the*



average person to do much more than he found necessary. But Mr. Sechler was not an average person, and this community is the better for it.

Occasionally one comes in contact with a person who becomes somewhat of an idol or ideal because of their patience and perseverance; most of us at some time or another say to ourselves, "I wish I were like so and so," in a manner of admiring envy. I think most people who knew Ralph Sechler for any length of time probably admired him in such a way; I did. He sought not glory, but by his service, glory has become his as shown by the respect he gained through the years in his business and community efforts and by the many friends he gained because of his warm and friendly personality and his ability to make his concern for people evident to them regardless of their social and economic status. He bore the burden of not only his own health problems but also those of his wife for the past few years. Despite these burdens he continued to serve others when asked, without sacrificing the welfare of his family.

Ralph Sechler presents a challenge to all of us each day when we face trying circumstances in which there is the opportunity and the temptation to say, "I have enough to do; I'd better quit," or "Please leave me out." He was a Christian and his life of service reflected his faith. Though sought by others for larger projects, he still did not abandon the smaller community matters to which he was devoted and to which he always gave his efforts. Surely, he has come to his just reward in Heaven.

Again, let it be said of Ralph Sechler: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant.."

All the things Ted said were true. Dad was a warm and compassionate person. He was a good father, good husband, good community person, and a good church person.

What I came to recognize as I got older, however, was that the success of the business was really due to the joint effort of both Dad and Mother. Without any negation of Dad's hard work and creativity, I have tried to give Mother her just dues.

Now we are into a new era where Dad and Mother's grandchildren, David and Karen, are running the business. Things are a lot different now than during the first 50 years. They have a well accepted label, reputation for quality, good plant, and a reasonable financial base. However, raw product is no longer easily available, the market place is truly a nightmare with the big distributors, big stores and big chains in many cases dictating what all the manufacturer has to agree to do before they will look at the product. This usually interprets into dollars--cash or product.

The big government has entered into the scene and continues to do more so all the time with regulatory powers such as OSHA, EPA, FDA, Department of Labor, etc. We are not against a lot of things these agencies are trying to do. It is just that in many instances there is little common sense used; the results - difficulty for the small manufacturer and higher prices for the consumer.

The present and next 25 years is, and will continue to be, a challenge. I would say the hard work begun by Dad and Mother must be continued!!



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